

Creating Counter-Discourses: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

The plight of Dalits in the Indian society is very vulnerable. They are oppressed and suppressed on the basis of caste as well as class. *Karukku*, a prominent work by Bama, very significantly raises questions on caste and religious issues that damage our society. Bama's fictional writings delineate several issues of violence related to Dalits. In a larger outlook, her literary works portray the marginalization and exploitation of Dalits at the hands of upper class society. Dalits are socially and economically exploited by the upper castes people. Through this autobiographical novel, Bama attempts to reflect, the sufferings of Dalits through the everyday social reality of her own community. She tries to project the social reality of oppressed who struggle every day for their survival. The present paper depicts the hierarchal rules made by the dominant sections of the society in which downtrodden have to suffer. In that case, they are compelled to go through the tough roads made for them. They are segregated, separated from the mainstream society and treated as 'other'. Because of the strict social and religious prevailing customs, they cannot speak of their own suffering and finally become 'Subalterns'.

Key Words: Marginalization, Oppression, Dalit, Women, *Karukku*.

There are myriad sections and groups in the world that are socially, politically and economically marginalized from other mainstream sections in their respective society. Analyzing the marginality in Indian context gives a clear idea that one of the marginalized factions is, of Dalits. Caste System, one of the biggest stigmas on Indian society, has made their lives

unbearable and unendurable from the time Immemorial. Due to this very system, these people have been forced to suffer mentally and physically. Dalits are the most marginalized segments in the society who have to suffer from multiple disadvantages so their condition is more vulnerable. They have also been addressed as Shudras, Atishudras, Harijans and untouchables. They are always left at the lowest rung of the Indian social order. They are the most unfortunate members of the society in India. Their past reveals that the vested interests and the aspirations of the higher castes sought their socio-cultural segregation, leading further to the marginalization, humiliation and isolation from the mainstream of society and life. In spite of the best efforts and many Constitutional Provisions, caste factor still operates both in direct and insidious way.

Here, Bama's *Karakku* is an autobiographical writing about author's childhood experiences as a Dalit and a Christian. *Karruku* gives a realistic picture of caste-ridden society where a person is judged by his caste, not by his virtues and deeds. This paper deals with the experiences of Christian Dalit women's issues like daily physical and mental torture, caste-based prejudices, negligence at the workplace, and a sense of insecurity and alienation in the public arena.

To understand the present work, it becomes very necessary, knowing exactly who Dalits are? Collins English Dictionary defines word 'Dalit' as " (in the traditional Indian Caste System) "a member of the lowest caste". Wikipedia defines the word "broken/scattered" in Sanskrit and Hindi, is a term mostly used for the ethnic groups in India that have been kept depressed by subjecting them to untouchability". Sharankumar Limbale , a Dalit critique observes :

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the terms describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm- labourers, workers , the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word it will not do to refer only the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included (30 Limbale).

Alok Mukherjee in his paper "*Reading Sharankumar Limbale's Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature: From Erasure to Assertion*" objected to Limbale above view of Including

economically weak people in Dalits. He asserts that the aforementioned Limbale view is his political move. Mukherjee fired many questions like : Does economically weak section has the same experiences of caste biasness and untouchability in its daily life? Do they (Economically weak people) also stand against the caste system? Do they have Dalit consciousness and commitment while producing literature? Mukherjee staunchly asserts that in the traditional caste system, position and rank is decided by birth in which a person is born, mobility in upward and downward in not possible, so the inclusion of economically weaker section does not fit in the hierarchical system.

Dalit literature is a new form of literature that started to come into existence after Indian Independence or in 1960s. Dalit writers took the inspiration from two precursors of Dalit movement, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule, and started to depict the daily experiences of Dalits, in their narratives to expose the hierarchical Hindu caste system. The writings of the particular group of people in the society referred to as Dalit literature, which is in fact an outburst of the suppressed voice of Dalits. Dalit literature is basically the literature written by Dalit in which they have expressed their own experiences of pain and pathos, agony and anguish. According to Sharnkumar Limbale, Dalit literature “mean[s] writing about Dalit by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness” (Limbale 19). The non-dalit writers who write about Dalit cannot come under the category of Dalit writers, because they fail to represent the true Dalit consciousness. So, in Dalit literature, Dalit experiences are more important than expressions. The nature of this literature rests/resides in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliations suffered by the Dalit in the past and perpetuation of the same process in the present also. An outstanding work of Dalit literature originates and comes into existence only when a Dalit life portrays itself from the Dalit point of view. Its uniqueness is that it is born out of the womb of untouchability. Another feature of Dalit literature is its collective aspect. The events, incidents, and experiences being depicted in the writing portray the life and experiences of all Dalits.

Cambridge English Dictionary defines ‘narrative’ as “a spoken or written account of connected events; a story” (CED). Wikipedia defines the word as “a narrative is a report of connected events, real or imaginary, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words, or still

or moving, or both” (Wikipedia). From the above definition it is evident that narratives are spoken or written events imaginary or real. Every section or group has its own narratives and same is the case with Dalits who depict their real experiences to raise their voice against the tyranny and exploitation meted out on them. They claim that the miserable living condition, they have been facing from centuries cannot be felt and depicted by non-Dalit writers because they do not have its first-hand experience

Dalits have very few possibilities of empowering themselves in a society that keeps them out of power, privilege, and dignity of self. However, Dalits exhibit enormous skills for survival and combat. They not only circumvent the restrictive code imposed upon them by upper castes but also challenge or subvert the same. Dalits in the society are perceived as a potential source of cheap and unpaid labour. Their chores largely include manual scavenging, working in factories, working at the farm in the afternoons in return for a handful of gram, doing menial works like a slave in upper caste people’s homes. A Dalit child, of course, gets discriminated and humiliated right from the birth. Generally, Dalits’ settlements are on outer periphery of the villages in Tamil Nadu. In ancient Hindu scriptures, narratives deprive them from acquiring education, collecting money, wearing good clothes and listening any type of sermon. Fetching water from the well being used by high castes, is not permitted to them. These types of norms imposed on them for centuries made them to believe that this hierarchical system is natural and cannot be altered.

Bama (b. 1958), also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a prominent Dalit feminist, committed teacher, and acclaimed writer from Tamil Nadu. She was born in a Dalit family with no basic facilities of living a decent life. She had to face unbearable incidents during her childhood. She received a warm welcome in the literary world when her autobiographical writing ‘Karruku’(1992) was published. She subsequently wrote two more novels, Sangati (1994) and Vanmam (2002) along with two collections of short stories. Bama was ex-communicated from her village for depicting it in poor light and not allowed to enter it for the next seven months. *Karukku* was, however, critically acclaimed and won the Crossword Book Award in 2000. The book has been translated into English and many other languages. Bama’s writings

portray caste-discrimination being practiced in Christianity and Hinduism. Her works are seen as embodying Dalit assertion and famed for celebrating the inner strength of the marginalized.

Karukku by Bama was originally written in Tamil in 1993 and translated into English version by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. In the book, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression against Dalits. In the translator's note, Lakshmi Holmstrom writes that *Kurruku* "tells the story of Bama's personal struggle to find her identity and it also argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression (Holmstrom xiv). Bama explores how exploitation and suppression of Dalit is legitimized and institutionalized by state, church and upper caste communities. Her autobiography depicts how Dalits toil hard from morning to night and even after that they do not have sufficient means to feed their family. They are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, panchayats, police, and other institutions. In her representation of Dalit, Bama presents Dalit primarily as workers who join the work force right from childhood and toil through adolescence, young age, middle age and almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognized by the society at large, and they are exploited at every stage. Bama's representation of a Dalit lifespan mirrors her struggle for empowerment, self respect and realization of a dignified existence. Her work, through a detailed account of Dalits trials and tribulations document their struggle for social, economic and political empowerment.

Bama portrays her childhood days lacking in the living facilities and even two times' food. In her village, there is complete segregation of people on the basis of their castes. People are identified and valued by the name of street in which they live, these streets denotes their castes. She comes from 'Paraya' community which is considered low caste and down looked upon by 'Naicker', 'Chaaliyar', and other upper castes. During her school and college days, she had to undergo caste based biasness and humiliation. Even after higher education and acquiring first rank in most classes, she could not escape from this castiest mentality of people. She joined a convent as a math teacher just to have a livelihood and to help poor students. But she was astonished to perceive that even Church, the home of Jesus, was also not untouched by this very evil. She was overlooked and made to feel shame for her low caste even after being one of the

best and qualified teachers. Bama was so much tortured mentally and physically by the caste biasness that she writes “I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste” (25).

In *Karukku*, Bama’s inspiring words awake Dalits from the deep slumber; “We, who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low” (25). *It* is a clarion call to Dalits to liberate themselves from bondage based on caste and religion.

Karukku stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied. Bama, through this book, not only created a space for her caste but also for all Dalits who have been victims of social hierarchy. By resisting and defeating all opposing forces which tried to suppress her, she has evolved herself as a role model for all Dalits. Although she was born in a Pariah community, it was through her hard work and zealous interest that she could establish a place for herself in society. Bama enabled herself to fight the odds and carried on with her higher education, and also at the same time thought about empowering all other depressed by raising their voice through her own writings. The best attempts are made to use depict the exactly same situation by including dialect and colloquial languages of her own village. Bama, while written her autobiography “uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout” (Holmstrom xix).

The autobiography is a narrative of trauma, pain, resistance, and atrocities committed on Dalit Christian women. It is also a document of poverty, violence, rejection, and suffering; it shows how writer strives hard to overcome the problems and how she reconstructs her own identity. The author is a representative of all Dalits who have suffered atrocities for centuries. By portraying her pitiable condition and unendurable life, Bama gives an accurate historical picture of hierarchical caste system. She is one of the most challenging figures in Dalit writers. The

author wants to break all the barriers of social and cultural system and depicts her problems as a Dalit.

Conclusion

Dalit narratives are against caste based hierarchical system, which is the main cause of their degraded and pitiable condition. Through their narratives, Dalit writers try to counter the main stream narratives that never give the real picture of untouchability and caste system. Though, most of these writers depicted their own life incidents and events in their writing, but all Dalits mirrors these incidents in their own life. The main purpose of Dalit narratives have been to arose a sense of self respect in the victims of the inhuman system and raise their voice against the perpetrators and the insidious system which privileges them to do wrongs to others. Dalit writers are mainly activists who are using this weapon of literature to annihilate the system that has divided people from uncountable years and created the seeds of inferiority and superiority by birth, in their minds.

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